DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 260 810 PS 015 279

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TITLE Children's Sociometric Groups: Developmental and Stability Issues.
PUB DATE May 85
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association (Chicago, IL, May 2-4, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; Grade 2; Grade 5; Individual Differences; Longitudinal Studies; *Peer Relationship; *Research Methodology; Research Problems; Social Development; *Sociometric Techniques
IDENTIFIERS Developmental Patterns; *Sociometric Status; *Stability (Social Relationships)

ABSTRACT

The stability of sociometric measures and their use for classifying elementary-age children are discussed. This is an important topic because of the assumption that childhood social maladjustment is a very stable and consistent phenomenon. Sociometric scores were collected over a 7-month period in a study of potential developmental differences between second and fifth grade children. Of 231 children from a middle to middle-lower socioeconomic school district outside a large Midwestern city, 53 were classified as popular children, 48 as rejected by peers, 20 as neglected by peers, 27 as controversial, and 83 as average. Over the 7-month period, sociometric groups were found to be consistent on the average of 32 percent. Rejected children were the most consistent group (52 percent), followed by popular children (43 percent), neglected children (23.5 percent), sociometrically average children (20.5 percent), and controversial children (18.5 percent). It is concluded that classification based on only one data collection may be problematic for the assignment of children to sociometric groups for research purposes, and especially so for the selection of children for clinical intervention. (RH)

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Children's Sociometric Groups: Developmental and Stability Issues

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Invited paper presented at the Midwestern Psychological Association, May, 1985, Chicago, Illinois

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I am going to talk about the stability of sociometric measures and how elementary-age children are classified according to this assessment method. This is an important topic due to the oft-cited evidence that children with difficulty in peer relations, which is usually assessed using a sociometric measure, have a significantly higher probability of later adjustment problems than children who have good peer relationships. The connection between poor peer relations for elementary-age children and maladjustment in later life carries with it the implication that childhood social maladjustment is a very stable and consistent phenomena. That is, children rejected by peers in early school years are also rejected by peers in later life. This is a critical assumption that warrants some empirical scrutiny, since intervention attempts assume this longitudinal relationship.

John Coie and Kenneth Dodge, two well-known researchers in the area of children's peer relationships, have utilized a standardized and absolute nomination procedure to place children into one of five sociometric groups: popular, average, rejected, neglected, and controversial children. The data from various studies suggests fairly good predictive and concurrent validity for this classification of children.

Rejected children have few friends and are actively disliked by peers. These children typically have significant behavior problems and in naturalistic and in analogue settings exhibit comparatively high levels of aggression and task inappropriate behavior. Neglected children, on the other hand, have few friends but are not disliked by their peers. A very different profile exists for neglected children. They are characterized as being shy by peers and teachers and engage in more solitary play than other children. They are generally viewed as being lonely. Our research and other studies consistently show that popular children do well

academically, are viewed by peers as competent, and display a range of prosocial behaviors such as helpfulness and empathy. Controversial children elicit both high positive and high negative scores from their peers. These children are a heterogeneous group. They exhibit both high levels of prosocial and negative behaviors with peers.

Children are classified into one of the five sociometric groups by using a positive nomination procedure, "Name three children you would prefer to play with in your class," and a negative nomination procedure, "Name three children you would least prefer to play with in your class." For each child one takes the number of positive nominations received for that child divided by the number of same-sex classmates nominating children in a classroom. Likewise, one takes the number of negative nominations received for a particular child divided by the same number of same-sex classmates nominating children. These scores are then collected across the different classrooms and are transformed to z scores so that cross-classroom comparisons can be made independent of the size of the classroom.

Using this procedure we were able to classify 231 second and fifth grade children from a middle to middle-lower socioeconomic school district outside of a large Midwestern city from an original pool of 472 children. Of these, 53 were classified as popular children, 48 children were classified as rejected by their peers, 20 as neglected from their peers, 27 were rated as controversial children, and 83 met the criteria of being considered average with regard to their peer ratings.

In our study we were interested in looking at potential developmental differences between second and fifth graders based on sociometric scores collected over a seven month interval, since we had found in an earlier study (Beck, Collins, Overholser, & Terry, in press) that first grade popular children displayed academic

achievement, engaged in more positive interactions with teachers and peers, and were viewed by teachers as less deviant than the remaining children in the study. Conversely, the sixth grade children in our study showed no relationship between academic achievement and peer friendship, and interestingly, teacher negative interactions were positively correlated with positive peer nominations. Given these interesting potentially developmental differences between how peer positive nominations are derived we decided to look at the stability and potential differences in sociometric scores that were given over a seven-month period.

Looking at Table 1, the data shows that controversial children are at risk for rejected status. It is critical to identify controversial children who are at risk in order to prevent them from experiencing a more uniform rejection from peers. Utilizing preventive measures before the children become consistently disliked by peers is particularly important in order that children do not, because of reputation or other factors, become more like those children in the rejected status group who remain consistently rejected over time. Rejected status appears to be a stable classification according to our data. Popular children are rather stable, or if not perceived as popular by the end of the school year from the beginning of the school year, they are characterized into an unclassified group, and examination of these data shows that these children are still generally perceived positively by peers, but do not meet the stringent criteria to be classified as popular.

So how stable are these classification systems? Two previous studies have also addressed this issue. One study by Newcomb and Bukowski in 1984 generally demonstrated low stability of group membership over a two year period. When stable group membership was defined as requiring consistency across six data collection points, they found an overall stability of 13.3%. The exception to this finding was the fact that rejected children evidence slightly higher short term

stability. This was also found in our study. Over seven months, we found that sociometric groups were consistent on the average of 32%. Rejected children were the most consistent group (52%), followed by popular children (43%), neglected children, followed by sociometric average children (20.5%), and finally, controversial children (18.5%). There were no discernible differences in stability of sociometric membership between second and fifth graders.

The classification system based on only one data collection may be problematic for the assignment of children's sociometric group for research purposes, and, especially in the selection of children for clinical intervention. The stability of rejected childrens' sociometric scores was also consistently found in Coie and Dodge's 1983 findings that underscored the persistent nature of rejected childrens' social difficulties.

References

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STABILITY OF SECOND AND FIFTH GRADERS' GROUP CLASSIFICATION OVER A SEVEN MONTH INTERVAL

Children classified as Popular at T_1 compared to T_2

Group Class (T_2)	Second Graders N = 24		Fifth Graders N = 29		Total N = 53	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Popular	11	45.8	12	41.4	23	43.4
Rejected	0	0	0	0	0	0
Neglected	0	0	0	0	0	0
Controversial	2	8.3	3	10.3	5	9.4
Average	1	4.2	0	0	1	1.9
Unclassified	10	41.7	14	48.3	24	45.3

Children classified as Rejected at T_1 compared to T_2

Group Class (T_2)	Second Graders N = 23		Fifth Graders N = 25		Total N = 48	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Popular	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rejected	12	52.2	13	52.0	25	52.1
Neglected	0	0	1	4.0	1	2.1
Controversial	0	0	2	8.0	2	4.2
Average	1	4.3	0	0	1	2.1
Unclassified	10	43.5	9	36.0	19	39.6

Children Classified as Neglected at T_1 Compared to T_2

	T_1	Second Graders N = 4		Fifth Graders N = 13		Total N = 17	
Group Class	T_2	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Popular		1	25.0	0	0	1	5.9
Rejected		0	0	0	0	0	0
Neglected		1	25.0	3	23.1	4	23.5
Controversial		0	0	0	0	0	0
Average		0	0	0	0	0	0
Unclassified		1	25.0	9	69.2	10	58.8
Moved		1	25.0	1	7.7	2	11.8

Children Classified as Controversial at T_1 Compared to T_2

	T_1	Second Graders N = 9		Fifth Graders N = 18		Total N = 27	
Group Class	T_2	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Popular		1	11.1	2	11.1	3	11.1
Rejected		3	33.3	4	22.2	7	25.9
Neglected		0	0	0	0	0	0
Controversial		2	22.2	3	16.7	5	18.5
Average		1	11.1	1	5.6	2	7.4
Unclassified		2	22.2	8	44.4	10	37.0

Children Classified as Average at T_1 Compared to T_2

	T_1	Second Graders N = 48		Fifth Graders N = 35		Total N = 83	
Group Class	T_2	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Popular		3	6.2	4	11.4	7	8.4
Rejected		2	4.2	0	0	2	2.4
Neglected		0	0	1	2.9	1	1.2
Controversial		6	12.5	1	2.9	7	8.4
Average		10	20.8	7	20.0	17	20.5
Unclassified		27	56.2	22	62.9	49	59.0